

Censors Attack NRC Uranium Data

The Lost A-Fuel Snippet Saga

By John J. Flalka

Washington Star Staff Writer

Officials of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission last weekend gave congressional investigators an unintended preview of the next hurdle they may face in their attempts to get to the bottom of the mysterious disappearance of 206 pounds of highly enriched uranium from a private company sometime during the mid-1960s.

Copies of a hastily released 550-page NRC report on the matter arrived at the House Interior Committee Saturday. The report was strange enough by itself, admitting that the NRC's top staff aide incorrectly told two committees last summer that the agency had seen "no evidence" of a diversion of a significant amount of bomb-grade nuclear material.

But committee aides also noticed that many pages had large square holes where NRC censors had snipped out "sensitive" sentences and paragraphs.

The snipping appeared to have been somewhat haphazard because different copies of the report had different paragraphs missing. And some of the snippets remained stuck in the reports' binders, giving little clues about what was "sensitive." According to one recipient, when he opened his copy a small piece of paper fluttered to the floor. It said "Israel."

YESTERDAY, THE NRC's four commissioners told a House Interior subcommittee, that they supported the report's conclusion that the NRC's executive director, Lee V. Gossick, misled Congress in his earlier testimony.

Led by the NRC's chairman, Joseph M. Hendrie, who said he was "deeply troubled" by the incident and its repercussions, the commissioners promised to give Congress a more candid view of nuclear safeguards, which one commissioner, Victor Gilinsky, referred to as a "very spongy area."

Interior Committee chairman Morris K. Udall, D-Ariz., said he intends to shift his inquiry from the NRC to the question of the suspected diversion itself, which involves a now-defunct private company, the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corp. of Apollo, Pa., that had a number of close ties to the Israeli government.

Gossick, Udall asserted, had "implied that the Apollo affair had been investigated and that there was no evidence of foul play."

"But we now know otherwise from press reports that have not been denied. We now know that high-level government officials have believed for years that there was a significant likelihood that high-enriched uranium had been diverted from Apollo."

REFERRING TO Gossick's earlier statements, Udall — who has received a classified briefing on the Apollo case from the CIA — told Gossick, "This put Congress off. It certainly put me off."

The CIA has told Udall and the NRC that it has at least circumstantial evidence that raises "serious questions" about the Apollo matter. The CIA is known to have a "strong opinion" that the material may have been diverted by Israeli intelligence operatives into that nation's nuclear

man, R-Md., sarcastically noted that the Democrats on the committee appeared to be holding the NRC to a "high standard of excellence" that had not been demanded of administration figures testifying on the Panama Canal.

Rep. Manuel Lujan Jr., R-N.M., suggested that the subcommittee was picking on Gossick because he was the last of a number of NRC officials who have made "no evidence" statements over the years.

Gilinsky denied that assertion, pointing out that many of the statements by former NRC officials have been carefully hedged. The commissioner asserted that the NRC has not been very effective at keeping track of weapons-grade nuclear material in the past.

The problem, he said, lies in unexplained discrepancies between plant inventories and the amounts of highly enriched uranium or plutonium known to have gone into certain plants. Gilinsky stated, "The one at Apollo is one of these, but there are others."

Another commissioner, Peter B. Bradford, was not present at the hearings, but issued a letter which said Gossick's earlier statement of the safeguards problem "does not pass muster" when weighed against the NRC's obligation to keep Congress "fully and currently informed" about its problems.